

IN THE WAR WHOREHOUSE

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IN PEACETIME THE MASS MEDIA INCULCATE THE
NORMS AND OPINIONS THAT A NATION WANTS
IN ITS PEOPLE. IN WARTIME THEY BECOME THE
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THE POPULACE

On 24 June 1876, elements of the United States Army's 7th Cavalry Division, commanded by George Armstrong Custer, engaged a group of Sioux and Cheyenne braves led by Chief Sitting Bull at Little Big Horn, Montana. The skirmish that ensued resulted in the death of Custer and all of his 250 men – twice the number of fatalities so far sustained by the United States 127 years later in its 'war' with Iraq.

Like many a sight seen in the deserts through which the US military's Humvee jeeps drove this winter, the war was mostly mirage, something that evidently escaped the notice of the hundreds of correspondents sent to cover it. What one overheated television reporter compared to the Battle of the Somme was little more than what in Los Angeles they call a drive-by shooting. It is only a mild exaggeration to say that American service personnel in Iraq were in greater danger from absent-mindedly-driven Coca-Cola trucks than from the opposing army, which had less firepower than that deployed by the police department in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Conquering by bribing people on the other side is an ancient and civilised form of warfare and if it was practised by the United States in Iraq it would explain the absence of anything that can remotely be called a battle. Evidence supporting the great non-conflict hypothesis surfaced in an article by Vago Muradian in the 19 May edition of *Defense News*, an arms industry publication living on the best of terms with the Pentagon brass. The article quotes General Tommy Franks, the man who ran the alleged war, as saying – by way of an explanation for the absurdly easy American victory – 'I had letters from Iraqi Generals saying, "I now work for you."' Another Pentagon official told the reporter, '... we knew how many of these [Iraqi generals] were going to call in sick.' And finally there is this quotation: 'What is the effect you want? How much does a cruise missile cost? Between US\$1 and \$2½ million. Well, a bribe is a PGM, a much

cheaper precision-guided munition – it achieves the aim but it's bloodless and there is zero collateral damage.'

The news that there was no war because the other side was paid to take a family leave day was picked up by Fred Kaplan, one of the best military journalists about, who published these good tidings on the internet in *Slate* magazine on 20 May – and there the story died.

None the less, the proposition that the Iraqi military had been paid to take a dive was supported by occasional puzzled dispatches filed out of Baghdad in the days immediately prior to the commencement of the bombing, reporting that no preparations for war were visible. No sandbagging, no evacuations, no mobilisation of air-raid wardens or medical personnel were evident. Here was a capital city of 5 million people under threat of imminent invasion and bombardment and it was business as usual.

If it wasn't a war, then what was it? Probably something akin to a turkey shoot. The press duly and diligently reported on the tens of thousands of bombs dropped on the Iraqi military. What got skipped over was that the turkeys could not or would not shoot back. It is the tales of heroic derring-do in the face of a completely defenceless opponent that cause the cynical to cock a suspicious eyebrow.

We can only speculate as to why so little was made of the battle-free nature of the conflict. At least three reasons suggest themselves. 1) The lazy intellectual torpor afflicting not a few American journalists. 2) The embarrassment print and broadcast media would face if they were to tell their publics: 'Whoops! That war, those heroes, those bloodcurdling, tear-jerking scenes we have been entertaining you with for weeks on end – well, it didn't happen.' 3) Although you might conclude that the United States government would have a motive to step forward and claim for itself a humane, non-lethal, non-destructive kind of warfare, that's not the reputation which the fire-eating, Israelised bellicists in the Pentagon want. The public relations policy pursued in those precincts is the old Roman one of *oderint dum metuant*. In short it's fear, not love, they seek to inspire.

In that spirit Rachel Corrie, a young American woman making her non-violent protest by being killed standing in front of a rampaging Israeli bulldozer in Gaza, was a one-day story. She might as well have been a suicide bomber. In contrast there is Private Jessica Lynch, the wounded soldier rescued from her fiendish Iraqi captors by the derring-do of the night-raiding US Army Rangers who braved death to snatch this young woman to safety. Thanks to the foresight of the military, an army TV cameraman was



Baghdad, April 2003: satellite dishes allowing international TV networks to send live broadcasts anywhere in the world. Credit: courtesy Anthony Borden, IWPR

brought along lest these heroic doings go unrecorded. For several days afterwards Jessica and her friends dominated all the US news channels.

It remained for Canada's *Toronto Star* to discover that there were no guards preventing Private Lynch from leaving the hospital, only a group of non-fiendish Iraqi medics doing their best to heal her wounds. The paper wrote that 'the so-called daring rescue was essentially a Hollywood-style stunt'. A few weeks later the BBC did a full exposé of the whole mendacious episode, but apart from a quick mention on CNN, a story in the *Washington Post* and an indignant column in the *Los Angeles Times*, the business was ignored by the mass media. The Potemkin war raged on, if not in Iraq, then on televisions and front pages across America.

With literally hundreds of journalists 'embedded', as we learned to say, in American military units, how could they have failed to see that – whatever might be going on around them – it wasn't a war in the ordinary meaning of the word? For a full answer we will have to wait for Phillip Knightley to revise his classic study of the history of war and journalism, *The First Casualty*. Until then we do know that many of the reporters sent to war by their assignment editors were neither well enough read nor well enough trained to resist co-option. Judging from their copy, they simply enlisted and out-gunhoed the Marines.

Many were the fairest-looking but least conscientious people in American journalism – men and women aptly described as war whores. They were the on-camera personalities, their American flag lapel pins glittering, who whooped and hollered as they and the military went a-romping through the Iraqi desert. Day in and day out, hour after hour, they tingled with happy excitement as they strained to infect their viewers with their enthusiasm for this strange adventure on the sands of Araby. Whether or not war is truly the health of the state, it can do wonders for one's own career. These were not the people to so much as whisper that it was all a charade.

However much war may depress advertising and ruin the news budgets of the big media corporations, it gooses the ratings and it makes stars of the on-air performers. And heroes, too. HBO ran the movie *Live from Baghdad*, a full-length docudrama glorifying war whoredom. War packaged as a reality show played around the clock on the news channels as the journalistic war profiteers promoted themselves and their careers. You could see the giddy emotional state of these men and women, clutching their microphones as their adrenalin-hyped voices reported from Washington, Baghdad, London, Amman or, better yet, from the deck of an aircraft carrier. These handsome men and attractive women in their soignée rumple had all the swash and all the buckle of the glamour-perfected pre-Technicolor movie stars. Seldom has ambition revealed itself as vividly as it did in the glistening eyes of the reporters, their happily agitated voices, their perturbed, gulping deliveries, the stagy bathos concealing their erotic delight in the cannon's comforting boom and the machine gun's reassuring chatter.

Simply put, the American mass media put itself at the service of the state. Any space between the two, often not very wide in times of peace, vanished. The right and the wrong of that cooperation depends on whether or not you were for or against the invasion of Iraq.

History tells us that when the United States went to war in the twentieth century, American journalism was among the first to enlist. The mass media's obedience to the Washington party line represents no deviation from past practice. In 1917 the government padlocked a small number of anti-war publications and since then wartime deviation from government policy has been rare indeed. A belief persists that the mass media parted company with the government over the Vietnam War, but it didn't. From the start the media backed the Vietnam War to the hilt, only occasionally arguing with the government over the best way to win it. Whether you

regard it as jingoism or patriotism, the mass media reaction to the Iraqi war was on time and on track. If George Bush said 'it's a war' or said 'it's a dinosaur', that's what the media saw and that's what the media said.

A minority of Americans, doubtless influenced by too much study of eighteenth-century political philosophy, believe in a press whose responsibilities do not include helping the government to win a war. These are the people who talk of objectivity, telling it like it is, etc, etc. Such opinions would have long since been relegated to Unitarian Church seminars were it not for the news industry using these slogans as the basis of a never-ceasing advertising campaign for itself, one similar to automobile advertisements in being a mishmash of truths, lies and in-betweenies. If people believe that the media are supposed to be free, non-partisan, fearless, objective and independent, it is in no small measure because the industry never stops telling the populace that is what they are. The mass media's description of the role they play is a haphazard reflection of the actualities.

Most American mass media most of the time contain little or no foreign news. All but a couple of hundred of the nation's thousands of radio stations broadcast no news at all, literally not a word. In peacetime, television stations and newspapers, with perhaps 25 exceptions, skip coverage of events abroad. Partly this situation is owing to the conservatism of the score or so of corporations that own virtually all of the mass media. Regardless of who is in the White House, it is their government and why should they ping it? But from time to time one or the other will break ranks and attempt to present current affairs to its public. It will soon give the idea up after it relearns the home truth that the vast majority of Americans will not watch or read news, unless it's local news, sports or gossip. Anyone who thinks otherwise will go broke trying. Those who doubt this observation might want to compare and contrast the international news service offered by CNN with the entirely different service presented to its American audience. American CNN is bubble-head news. It is an unwatchable gallimaufry of crime, scandal, tear-jerker reunions and the like.

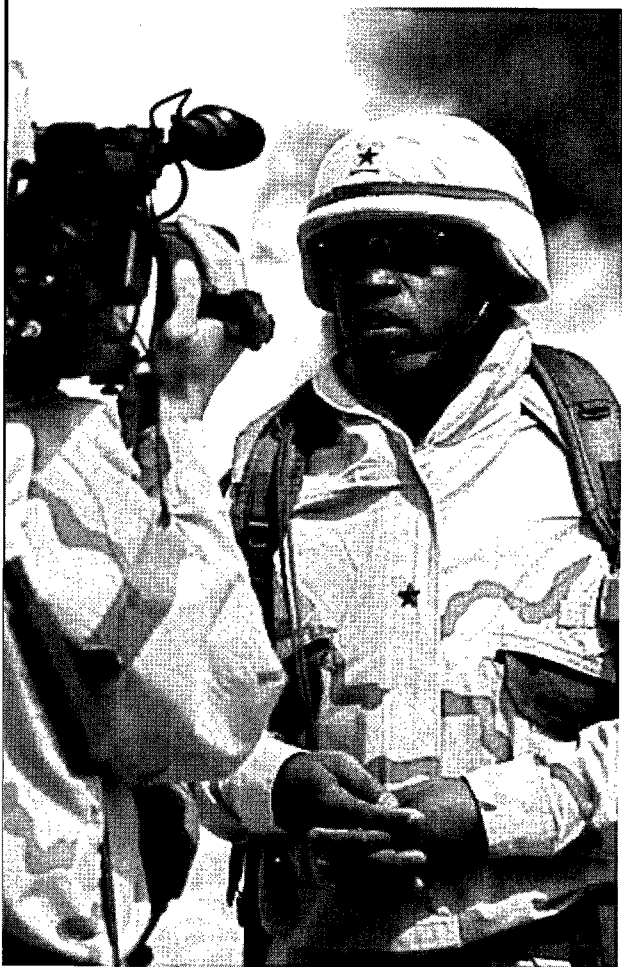
In peacetime the functions of mass media are advertising, entertainment and inculcating the norms and opinions that a nation, terrified of disunity, wants in its people. Even seemingly centrifugal ideas such as 'diversity' are reconfigured by the mass media and used to enforce the conformity that may presently be among America's strongest characteristics. In wartime such institutions have no capacity to be other than the means by which the central government instructs the populace.

This could even be said of such top-notch media as the *New York Times*, which often functions as an American *Osservatore Romano*, the semi-official publication of the government and the leading elites and power groups outside government. To the practised reader there are days when the *Times*'s front page looks more like a bulletin board of leaks and announcements from major private and public institutions than a newspaper printing independently gathered information.

Of late the *Times* has run into trouble. One of its reporters was revealed to be a cocaine-using wingnut who for months found it more convenient to invent the content of his news dispatches than to get on a plane and report them. It turned out that the newspaper's internal controls were too feeble to recognise what was fact and what was creative writing. That scandal had no sooner subsided than it was learned that Rick Bragg, a senior reporter, had been claiming an unpaid intern's legwork as his own. These incidents merely confirmed what perspicacious readers have known for some years, which is that one cannot rely on the paper's accuracy as one once could.

The noise attendant on these events was deafening, although their significance is not great. The *New York Times* has no plausible competition as the prestige national newspaper, so its readers will put up with an awful lot before they begin grubbing around for a substitute. It is the third, less widely reported uproar involving Judith Miller, a star foreign correspondent, that is causing consternation. In the lead-up to the invasion and afterwards, Miller was the principal *Times* correspondent writing about weapons of mass destruction. Her copy has been an unending warning that the Iraqis were ready, willing and able to let loose a nightmare of carnage on an innocent world. Since other, less prestigious publications and much, if not most, of television take their cue from the *Times*, her stories solidified the conviction that these weapons existed and were aimed at the American heartland. It is reasonable to assume Miller's work played no small part in building popular support for the war in the face of scepticism almost everywhere else.

Long before her weapons of mass destruction hit the page, Miller's critics, mostly other foreign correspondents and think-tankers, had come to believe that she is less of a reporter than a conduit through which powerful people and institutions get their side of the story out. Their suspicions about Miller were confirmed when it popped out that her main source for her weapons stories is Ahmad Chalabi, the Iraqi exile with a troubled past whom the White House and the Pentagon once hoped to govern their newly conquered territory. It also came out that at least one of her stories



*Ramaila Oilfield, Iraq, 27 March 2003:
Brigadier General Robert Crear talks to the
international media. Credit: US Army /
Pfc Mary Rose Xenikakis*

concerning WMDs had been all but dictated and edited by the army before Miller sent it to the *Times*, which put it on its front page.

The Miller episode provides a glimpse of some of the processes and manipulations by which the United States is governed, but it does not describe the completeness and uniformity of their effect on the population. No major news organisation evinced doubts that the famous 'smoking gun' would be found, and now that it is turning out to be a dribbling water pistol, the subject is passed over everywhere in near silence. The diminished and almost furtive forces of dissent blame the concentration of media ownership for the shrinkage of public dialogue into public monologue, but this may be wishful thinking. When Americans do have a podium on which to stand and freely express themselves, they rarely have much to say. And when they do, few of their fellow citizens are

inclined to listen. Published organs representing dissenting points of view are few in numbers and readers. Only one United States senator, Robert Byrd of West Virginia, fully, completely and unqualifiedly opposed the invasion of Iraq.

The entertainment media are as important in the provision of information and the shaping of opinion as journalism. For the past ten or 15 years, movies, theatrical and made for TV, have presented a diet of shows glorifying American military might and how that might was used by the United States to save weak, incompetent, inferior democracies such as Great Britain. Ham-handed propaganda movies like the odious *Saving Private Ryan* are taken to be historical truth by the great unwashed and by the editorial writers. The country is soaked in false, inaccurate, distorted and self-adulatory histories. Thanks to these media, America is coming to see itself as the dissed democracy of generosity, goodness and valour which is met by ingratitude, spite and envious hatred, the natural consequence of being better than everyone else. The secondary message is that America is alone in a hostile world in which friends are few and unreliable.

At the same time political semiotics have been changed. American flag idolatry is practised all over; the flag lapel button or brooch for women is nigh on mandatory in certain occupations; the yellow ribbon is universally hung from trees, mailboxes, porches and all manner of public places. George W Bush has a four-person team doing for him what the 1930s movie maker Leni Riefenstahl did for Adolf Hitler, that is prepare backdrops heavy with symbolic meaning for presidential appearances. The pledge of allegiance has become a tool of social intimidation. One is pressured to recite it in the classroom, on the athletic field, at theatrical events and at the commencement of every kind of meeting. The singing of the national anthem is incessant. Athletic events begin with an 'Oh, say can you see' and are interrupted midway for a rousing chorus of 'God Bless America'. The country is taking on a hue and tone reminiscent of the authoritarian state.

As it does so, the distinction between patriotism and militarism is getting blurred. Even before 11 September the public was being schooled to believe in a version of *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* which to a non-American might sound not unlike the creed of the suicide bomber. As the first mass sybaritic society, one that has perfected vicarious warfare in which only the other side falls down dead, few acts of self-immolation are to be anticipated, but others are sure to die. □

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